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Commentary on Govier

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RESPONSE TO GOVIER'S "ARGUING FOREVER? OR: TWO TIERS OF ARGUMENT APPRAISAL"

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Introduction

I want to thank Trudy for the careful attention she has given to my proposal about the need for a dialectical tier in argumentation. In her paper, Govier identifies ten difficulties with that proposal. I want to respond to her points. Govier then proceeds to propose some terminological and substantive amendments which she says are in the spirit of my thinking but avoid the difficulties. I also want to comment on her proposed revisions.

Govier's difficulties

1. Govier's first difficulty is that my proposal requires a substantial revision in our conception of argument. To which my response is: Yes, and no. Before explaining, I want to say just a few words about what's behind my proposal.

In my judgement, the practice of argumentation is in jeopardy. There are numbers of reasons why that is so, some having to do with developments in the broader culture, others have to do with events in philosophy and logic in this century. I believe that in this climate we (logicians and argumentation theorists) must find ways to safeguard and to nourish the practice. In my judgement, the prevailing view about what is required for an argument (a premise leading to a conclusion) is too loose, too permissive. In my view, we need to tighten the conceptual screws, demand more ... not less of what is required for a piece of reasoning to qualify as an argument.¹ This will mean that what is required for a good argument also undergoes some inflation.

In making this proposal about the need for a dialectical tier, I have been led by *the best practices* which have always been richer than our official theory indicated. Serious, skilful arguers have always included something akin to what I have called the dialectical tier. (See for example the structure Aquinas uses in the *Summa Theologiae* or Descartes in his *Meditations* and Replies...). So in my view the practices of best arguers have more or less embodied the structure that I am proposing. (Just why the gap has developed between theory and best practices is itself a fascinating question I cannot go into here.) Further, I have argued that the very same logic that in the first instance yields the illative core also requires, if we carry out the line of reflection, the dialectical tier.

My proposal regarding the revision of our conception will strike some as radical. But let me add that I see the proposal not as stating the necessary and sufficient conditions for all arguments but rather as defining the core notion of argument, the ideal over which we make theory and policy and which is more or less represented by uses on other points of the spectrum. Or to put the matter in Wittgensteinian terms, the term "argument" has a multiplicity of uses but what I seek to define is something like the paradigm case.

2. Govier's second objection is that what I require is impossible because no argument can include replies to objections, since those objections lie in the future. I agree. Yet certainly in many cases the arguer can anticipate some objections. For example, I anticipate the objection this proposal will be unacceptable because it will call for too radical a revision in how we apply the term argument. In arguments about capital punishment, there are pretty well known objections that one must deal with whether one wishes to argue for it or against it. Perhaps it will help to introduce here the distinction between types and tokens. Then we can say that of course the arguer cannot be expected to respond to all objection tokens because he cannot be expected to know them; but there are generally objection types that he or she can be expected to respond to—and that is his or her dialectical obligation to do so.

3. Govier's third difficulty is that it will not be possible for the arguer to deal with all possible alternative conclusions. I agree. Therefore I propose to broaden this issue and say this: "Every arguer has certain dialectical obligations which includes handling objections, alternative positions and criticisms. It is clear that the arguer cannot deal with all of these, certainly not all tokens and probably not even all types. But it does not follow from this that the arguer does not have certain obligations: the problem for informal logicians and argumentation theorists is to specify these."² Govier herself makes a stab at doing so.

4. In view of these objections, Govier argues, "it is objectionable to label an argument incomplete because it does not address objections and consider alternatives." Two points. First, Govier's point gets its force by not being quantified. If we revise the statement using universal quantifier, it then reads: "...because it does not address all objections..." then I agree with her. If we use the existential quantifier, it then reads: "...because it does not address some objections..." then I disagree with the statement. This raises the question what should we say about a piece of reasoning that contains premises leading to a conclusion (she calls this the logical core, I prefer to call it the dialectical tier) but does not handle any objections etc. ... does not contain a tier in which the arguer discharges his or her dialectical obligations? My instinct is to say this is an incomplete argument; the arguer hasn't finished the job. It's like a two story house without the second story.

Govier claims that such "a standard is not viable or practical."

Here I must confess I am not sure what she means.

5. Govier's fifth difficulty concerns my suggestion that some fallacies can be seen as fallacies occurring in the dialectical tier. She adduces examples where such fallacies occur in the logical tier (which I would prefer to call the illative core). What I should have said was that in some instances straw man and slippery slope and ad hominem will be fallacies at the level of the dialectical tier. I think this is particularly true of *straw person*. The main reason that we have this fallacy is that arguers understand the need to deal with the views and the objections of their interlocutors.

6. Govier's sixth difficulty is that it is not clear what I mean by exploring the consequences of the argument. She points out, rightly, that understood one way this obligation is too narrow and suggest that I might better refer inclusively to consequences or implications. And she suggests that this might be redundant because these would be included in someone's objections. I agree with this point and accept her proposal.

7. Her seventh difficulty is that the criteria I put forth for the dialectical tier are not criteria but rather initial statement of conditions of adequacy. I take her point. (Still it is interesting that we do not have a concept or a term to refer to that quality that an argument displays of being dialectically well developed.)

8. Her eighth difficulty is that there is no reference to the need of amending the argument in light of subsequent objections and criticisms. I did not include that in the papers she is referring to which are focused more on the product (the argument itself) than on the process of arguing that produces it. When it comes to discussion of the process, I do incorporate into my theory the need for revision and amendment.

9. Her ninth point is largely a restatement of her earlier point that the way I have stated matters about the dialectical tier is too broad. She says "a more flexible realistic condition regarding objections and alternative should be developed." I agree. "There are degrees of completeness and there is an important sense in which the dialectical tier will never be absolutely complete." I agree.

10. Her last point is that my account leaves open the question of what it is to deal well with objections and adequately address alternative positions. Again I agree. She goes on to suggest that

the fact that the standards of cogency and soundness must be used for the main arguments and all supplementary arguments strikes me as good reason for saying that the logical tier is more fundamental than the dialectical tier.

I take her position to be that the criteria (cogency and soundness)³ for the logical tier will turn out to be an adequate set of criteria for the dialectical tier. I am not at all sure that this is true, even though I tend once again to agree that in some ways the logical tier is more fundamental.

Govier's proposed revisions

I find myself in agreement with most of Govier's proposals.

She introduces a distinction between a Good Case and an Exhaustive case and claims (rightly I believe) that a Good Case may be good enough. I accept what she has to say about Exhaustive Cases and agree further that one can make a good case without making an exhaustive case. (My way of putting it would be that we can have good arguments that are not conclusive arguments. See my "The principle of vulnerability," *Informal Logic* 17 (1995) 259-69.)

In the matter of constructing a Good Case, Govier sees our dialectical obligations are focused on alternative positions and objections. I agree these are both involved: that is, to make a good case, the arguer must not only handle objections but must in some way show that his position is better than the alternatives.

On the matter of handling objections: Govier's position is that the arguer is obligated to handle dialectically significant objections. Govier proposes to unpack this notion in terms of what is taken seriously by the audience to whom the argument is addressed. That is, an objection is significant if it is taken seriously by the audience to whom the argument is addressed.

My first instinct is to concede that this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. There may be significant objections which are not taken seriously by the audience, and this can happen either for good reasons or bad ones.

But I think I want to delay that instinct and instead question whether this is a necessary condition. How is the arguer to make this determination? What tells him that an objection is taken seriously by the audience? Is it

enough to know that e.g. one member of the audience takes it seriously? Is there a quantitative criterion here? or is it qualitative: i.e, if Tony Blair takes it seriously, then it is significant?

These are matters that need to be worked out in the theory of argument.

Govier's suggestion is not unlike Hitchcock's. He has suggested the following formulation: "The arguer is expected to deal with any objection which would reasonably be expected to raise a serious doubt about the cogency of the argument.⁴" Here I take "expected" to have some kind of audience-reference.

I am unhappy with any unpacking that relies heavily on the notion of *audience* for at least two reasons. First, audiences are notoriously heterogenous: Johnson takes it seriously, Blair does not, Pinto is undecided. Second, there may be worthwhile objections that are not known to any of the audience.

I wonder if we don't have to find some other way to develop the idea of which objections are significant. The objection will either itself have been defended by a line of reasoning, or it will not have.


Conclusion

On the whole I think that one way of understanding our differences is that Govier is thinking more of the process of arguing, whereas I am thinking more of the product. Thus in my papers I do not explicitly call for the revision of the argument in light of objections, though my own theory does stipulate the need for that.


In her concluding comments, Govier hints that my proposal may be too exhausting and that Kuhn's work contains sober reminders about the limitations of real-life arguers and the constraints under which they operate. She adds that "quite apart from patience, there may be limited space ... for the kind of argumentation required in order to put forward a Good Case."

If this is true, then it seems to me that one of two conclusions follows. Perhaps Govier and I have been unrealistic in our depictions for what is required for a Good Case. Alternatively, we develop a keener appreciation for what required for this most valuable intellectual practice to flourish. I think Govier is right in suggesting that those who are used to instantaneous information and the quick pace of life in the TV and electronic age will find the slower pace of argumentation a challenge, indeed a cultural adjustment. That among other concerns is what leads me to the view that we must do a better job of preparing people, introducing people to this valuable practice of argumentation.


Notes

1. My strategy here is the opposite of Gilbert (1997), but then I think we have different starting points and different interests. He sees argumentation as a form of communication and so proposes a broadening of our definition; I see it as an instrument of rational persuasion, one of very few such instruments that still remain, and so I opt for a kind of narrowing. 

2. In thinking through these things it may be helpful to use the distinction between a perfect and an imperfect obligation—a suggestion first made to me by Hans Hansen. A perfect obligation is an obligation to a specific other; an imperfect obligations is an obligation to unspecified other. Thus I have an obligation to be charitable but

that obligation can be satisfied in any number of ways. On the other hand, my obligation to keep my marriage vow is a perfect obligation because it is owing to one and only one person: my wife. I suspect that we will find that the arguer's obligations will be a mixture of both. 

3. This juxtaposition of cogency and validity troubles me. 

4. Hitchcock made this suggestion during a session of the 1996 Ontario Philosophical Society meetings at which I presented a paper: "Arguers and Dialectical Obligations." 

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